

## Consequences of Universal Suffrage

Exercising one's right to vote is one of the main ways that Americans can help decide the future of the country. However, currently not every American aged 18 and over has this right or is able to exercise it. Those previously and currently incarcerated are disenfranchised in many states, noncitizens cannot vote in the United States, and many citizens who have the right to vote are not able to because of barriers such as strict voter ID laws. Although it does not solve the issue of gerrymandering and electoral geography, instituting a regime of universal suffrage with automatic voter registration would make voting more accessible to everyone 18 and older. However, this may have both positive and negative consequences such as, increased substantive and descriptive representation, increased polarization, and possibly decreased legislative productivity.

Automatic voter registration can help increase representation for those living in states/areas that previously had strict voter registration laws. In the case of Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled to invalidate the coverage formula of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was used to name areas of the United States that needed to pass preclearance in order to change voting procedures. They were selected based on whether they had used tests or prerequisites to voting in the 1960s and 1970s (Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder, 2013). Following this case, several states that had previously been under preclearance were able to change voting procedures to institute voter-identification laws and destroy laws that made it easier to register and cast ballots, actions that have primarily impacted poor people, people of color, and the elderly (Newkirk II 2018). By instituting automatic voter registration, the votes of these people will no longer be suppressed. Depending on what candidates they decide to

vote for, their substantive and/or descriptive representation may be increased. However, since those primarily impacted by the strict voting laws were minorities, it is also possible that their representation won't increase as much as one would expect, since they aren't very represented by interest groups (Strolovitch 2006).

Those previously and currently incarcerated may also see their representation increased. However, whether their representation increases also depends on whether they will decide to vote. According to research conducted by White, even short jail sentences can drive people away from voting, with the effects heavily concentrated among black voters (White 2019). As Weaver and Lerman argue, contact with the criminal justice system can cause a negative perception of the government and lead to lower levels of political participation and civic engagement (Weaver and Lerman 2019). If they do decide to vote, since mass incarceration disproportionately impacts black people (Hinton 2016), many more Black Americans will be able to exercise their right to vote. This may lead to increased representation of black and minority voters in political positions.

Noncitizens, who previously did not have a voice in the election process, may also see their representation increased. However, giving noncitizens the right to vote may lead to anger from those with anti-immigrant views. Increasing feelings of white identity and white solidarity have caused increasing anti-immigrant views in the Republican party (Jardina 2019). Because of this, instituting universal suffrage may cause further polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties. Party polarization is associated with increased party competition for control of Congress (McCarty 2019). When there's a rise in competition, there is less of an incentive for the minority party to work with the majority party in Congress and the majority party has less of an incentive to cooperate with how they use their power (McCarty 2019). When the parties don't

have incentives to compromise in Congress, it can lead to decreased legislative productivity. Although there may be more minority representation in Congress, they may not be able to pass the bills that their voters support.

One of the drawbacks of instituting this regime of universal suffrage is that it doesn't solve the issue of gerrymandering. Currently, there are many majority-minority districts that were originally intended to increase minority representation in Congress, but that have had the opposite effect (Cameron et al. 1996). Concentrating minorities in one district dilutes their influence in the surrounding districts, so those running in the surrounding districts don't have to advocate for the issues affecting minority voters, which decreases their overall representation in Congress (Cameron et al. 1996). Even though the main beneficiaries of instituting universal suffrage may be minorities, if the electoral geography is structured in a way that their influence is diluted, not much can change in their representation.

To conclude, while it might be expected that equal representation increases when universal suffrage is instituted, it is also likely that not much will change in how people are represented depending on the circumstances. It can also lead to increased polarization as many may disagree with the decision to implement universal suffrage, which can then lead to less legislative productivity. While I don't believe that implementing universal suffrage will be possible in the near future, I think that it would be an important step to take to ensure that people are equally represented. If the United States were to implement this law, they should also consider changing electoral geography so that universal suffrage can truly mean universal representation.

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